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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ABUJA 002148

SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF/W, INR/AA  
DOE FOR GEORGE PERSON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/29/2018

TAGS: [KIRF](#) [KISL](#) [PGOV](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: NORTHERN NIGERIA EXPERIENCES A RELATIVE REPRIEVE  
IN EXTREMIST ACTIVITY, RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

REF: ABUJA 321

Classified By: Political Counselor Walter Pflaumer for reasons 1.4. (b  
& d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Over the last several months there has been relative calm in Northern Nigeria; there have been few religious conflicts and no indications of extremist activity.

Several factors have contributed to this reduction in activity, including: a settling of reactions to Sharia law implementation, satisfaction that the President is again a Northerner, a reduction in the central government's interference in religion, distractions by political events, and the timing of Ramadan. However, Post believes three major factors remain present that could lead to increased religious extremism and violence: poverty, lack of electoral reform, and corruption. Locally engaged staff (LES) report that Nigeria's economic situation and the attitude and responsibilities of the country's political leadership are frequent topics of sermons - meaning that the economic and political challenges Nigeria faces are regularly brought to the attention of the average Muslim Northern Nigerian. In addition, U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East is frequently addressed by imams following statements or actions by the USG. We remain vigilant of the situation in Kano where Sharia authorities, known as Hisbah, have increasingly targeted members of the entertainment industry (both over content and failure to submit material for censorship), and in Sokoto where continued tension between the Sunni and Shia communities could again devolve into violence. Although we would not go as far as to say extremism is declining in Northern Nigeria, there has not been any recent significant evidence to suggest an increase. End Summary.

Relative Calm

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¶2. (C) Over the last several months there has been relative calm in Northern Nigeria; there have been very few religious conflicts and no indications of extremist activity. There have been no assassinations, no major national or international events to spark conflict, and less media attention on religious issues, all of which likely contributed to the reduction in incidents of violence. As Dr. Hameed Bobboyi, Special Assistant to the Sultan of Sokoto and former Director of Arewa House, told Poloff on October 22, there has been "no major event to change the status quo." While there have been some cases of inter-religious conflict

between Muslims and Christians in Kwara State, the events appear isolated and proper legal action is being taken. Additionally, in Kano State, Sharia police have arrested and prosecuted entertainment industry professionals for allegedly violating state censorship laws (such as failure to register with the State Censorship Board), but these cases are also isolated and have not led to any violence. In Sokoto, violence between Sunni and Shia groups has declined in the past several months; and recent reports indicate that calm has returned to the region. (Comment: Although we would not go so far as to say extremism is declining in northern Nigeria, there has not been any significant evidence to suggest an increase. Even in the events in Kwara and Kano States cited above, the conflicts do not seem to be part of a larger movement toward extremist activities. Sokoto, however, continues to be an area of concern which Post will monitor. End Comment.)

#### Factors Contributing to the Reprieve

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13. (C) Several factors have contributed to a reprieve in extremist activity and religious conflict, including: a settling of reactions to Sharia, representation of Northerners in the Presidency, a reduction in the central government's involvement in religion, distractions by political events, and the timing of Ramadan.

-- Over time, reactions to Sharia have died down. Non-Muslims who were previously opposed to Sharia have ceased to protest, largely because it has proved less onerous for non-Muslims in practice than previously feared, and the

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implementation of Sharia has diminished tempers of Muslim extremists who no longer have anything to demand.

-- As a Northern Muslim, President Yar'Adua has provided Northern Nigerians with some sense of being better represented in government than they were under former President Obasanjo, an evangelical Christian from the Southwest. In addition, Yar'Adua is seen as a Muslim who is part of the broad Muslim community, not part of any particular group or sect.

-- The central government has paid little attention to religious groups, at least publicly. PolAssistant noted that, unlike in the past several years, recently there have not been the sorts of harsh crackdowns on religious minorities, such as the suppression of Shia rallies, by the State Security Service (SSS) or other security forces. While there are unproven rumors the SSS was involved in the July 2007 assassination of the outspoken Sunni Imam Umaru Dan-Maishiya (see reftel), there have been no similar incidents more recently. (Comment: Whether the SSS was actually involved in the assassination is less relevant as a cause of religious tensions than the perception of the community at large. End Comment.)

-- The political climate has likely distracted Nigerians from religious issues. Given President Yar'Adua's health, and the focus on electoral reform, Northerners are likely too concerned about the North's stake in the Presidency to become involved in religious conflicts. Radio news such as VOA Hausa and BBC Hausa Service are extremely popular in Northern Nigeria. As a result, nearly everyone, including the farmer and the trader, follows the nation's political situation and it is a common topic of discussion.

-- During Ramadan it is unlikely for conflict to occur because Northern Muslims are focused on fasting, charity, and prayer. Dr. Bobboyi, the Special Assistant to the Sultan, told Poloff that no one will incite conflict during the month long observance. End Note.)

#### Factors That Could Lead to Violence

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14. (C) Despite the relative calm, Post believes three major factors remain present that could lead to increased religious extremism and violence in the future: poverty, lack of electoral reform, and corruption.

-- Poverty in Nigeria has been increasing, especially in the North. Although Nigeria avoided a food crisis this year, lack of rain and increased desertification in the North mean more competition for already scarce resources. As a result of the extreme poverty large numbers of unemployed youth have poured into urban centers throughout the North. Such unemployed youth can serve as a breeding ground for extremist ideology if sparked by the right kind of leadership. Likewise, the almajiri represent a relatively easy target for recruitment by extremist groups; almajiri are young children whose impoverished parents send them away to be taught by an Islamic teacher or "Malam", who in turn sends the children to engage in street begging. Growing up outside a stable family environment, this group of children and youths is particularly susceptible to recruitment by extremist factions or criminal groups.

-- Religious conflicts in Nigeria are rarely initiated due to differing belief systems; rather they are generally sparked by economic events. It is our sense that the lack of ability of the political establishment to address economic and social welfare concerns results in frustration and desperation, which contribute to both ethnic and religious violence.

-- Finally, corruption of leaders in the government and religious organizations could contribute to Northerners' discontent. One of the motives behind the implementation of Sharia law was the moral decay that Northerners observed among the political elite. The public hoped that Sharia would reinstate order and justice. However, Sharia has not

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fulfilled those hopes, and the elite continue to function outside of the legal system. As a result, we believe that Northern Muslims will likely seek justice in more fundamental forms of Islam.

#### Sermons and Imams

15. (C) Post's locally engaged staff report that Nigeria's economic situation and the attitude and responsibilities of the country's political leadership are frequent topics of sermons in their Mosques (in Abuja, Kaduna, and Zaria) - meaning that Nigeria's economic and political challenges are regularly brought to the attention of the average Muslim northern Nigerian. In addition, sermons often comment on USG statements or actions related to Middle East, particularly in regard to U.S. policies on Iraq and Iran. In September, Post's Cultural Affairs Assistant heard an imam in Kaduna preach that the United States is using the nuclear issue in Iran as an excuse to attack the country. LES report that there is a general feeling in the North that Islamic culture is under attack by the West. On the other hand, Post's Cultural Affairs Assistant noted that he has observed growing awareness among some Northern Nigerians of the "other side" of U.S. foreign policy, including a realization that the United States is improving Nigeria through development projects. Still, PolAssistant cautioned that this awareness is limited in scope and that the USG needs to expand on its promotion of assistance programs to the Nigerian public. PolAssistant also reported that many imams are calling on their congregations to be honest, mindful of their duties, good to their neighbors, and to respect authority.

16. (C) LES opined that younger imams often address contemporary issues and tend to be more outspoken (likely as a result of globalization and increased access to media), whereas older imams are more cautious and conservative with their statements. The younger generation is often critical of the USG and its policies, and also criticizes Nigerian and Arab leaders for aligning with the United States.

## Areas of Concern

17. (C) Although isolated to Kano, over the past few months the Hisbah have increasingly targeted members of the entertainment industry. Entertainment professionals (including movie directors, actors, comedians, and writers) have been arrested for alleged violations of the Kano State censorship law, including operating without registration with the State Censorship Board, producing movies and publishing books without censorship, and including nudity and "immoral acts" in films. Additionally, LES report that there were several book burnings in Kano which aim to destroy "Kano Market Literature" - cheaply bound romance novels that address courtship, polygamous marriage, and the meaning of love and often critique the corrupt elite and failures of the older generation. It is too early to call these incidents a trend. But it appears that Islamic sects are engaged in a battle to determine who is most Islamic. However, this varies by region. Like Kano, Plateau State is reportedly a very tense location; while in Kaduna the population growth and movement of people (both Christian and Muslim) within the city indicate a growing confidence among its residents that conflicts have subsided.

18. (C) The number of Shia in Nigeria is growing, as people who are frustrated by their economic positions are recruited or convert from other Islamic sects. In Sokoto, tensions between Sunni and Shia resulted in several conflicts last year, including the attacks on scholars of both sects and the murder of Sunni Imam Dan-Maishiya in July 2007. However, since then the situation has been improving and several individuals have been convicted or are currently standing trial for these crimes. Sheik Abubakar Jibril, Chief Imam of Faru Faru Juma'a Friday Mosque in Sokoto, told PolAssistant on October 28 that things have now calmed down in Sokoto, especially in the last few weeks. (Comment: The reason for the cease of conflict between the Sunni and Shia in Sokoto is unknown. Post will continue to monitor the area closely and

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watch for any signs of increased tension. End Comment.)

19. (U) This cable coordinated with Consulate Lagos.  
Sanders